

Good morning. Thanks for that warm welcome. And thank you very much for this opportunity to welcome you in Tbilisi on behalf of the Association of Information Specialists (AIS) - one of the organizers of the workshop. I would like to thank our friends and colleagues from the US, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia who have worked very hard to make this event happen. I would like especially thank the American Library Association (ALA) delegation and the ALA president Ms. Nancy Kranich who proposed an idea of assisting to the development of our library associations and libraries by holding a special workshop where leading members of the ALA could share with us their valuable experience and organizational knowledge that made the ALA one of the most influential associations in the US and in the world, a true defender of a library profession and libraries.

We also welcome the ALA's new policy to be more actively involved in International Librarianship and we hope that this policy and our cooperation will continue over the years to come.

The workshop is at the right time. During the past years some progress has been made in providing CPE to our librarians. More than 100 librarians from the South Caucasian libraries have been trained at the Regional CPE Center. Another 100 librarians will be trained next year. We are also slowly but moving towards introduction of new library standards, which will make our information systems, library technical services and even library education curricula compatible with those in the US. Before the end of the year we will translate in Georgian and publish manuals of MARC21, Dewey13 and ACCR2. This is a necessary step we need to make to facilitate an effective exchange of information and bibliographic data with leading library systems and information centers, become a part of the global information - library infrastructure.

But, there are problems that we have not yet started working on and which require an urgent attention of the library community.

First off all we need to revitalize, reorganize and strengthen our public library system. There is no democracy without an informed society. A good public library system is essential for information dissemination and with other communication services comprises a vital infrastructure of our statehood.

The global economy takes over the world and we have also become a part of it after signing the WTO agreement. The industrial economy gives its way to an information economy or as Europeans prefer to say – an information society. Information economy is a knowledge-based economy. The country can succeed in this economy only if it can produce competitive knowledge workers and have an informed population. A basic commodity of this economy is information and main media of this economy is the Internet, which does not recognize any national borders or geographic restrictions. Because of these unique characteristics some argue that the Internet will promote democracy, education and economic prosperity in developing countries. However, that to happen we need to have a sufficient level of the Internet connectivity of our population. Otherwise, the Internet may even increase the division of our society along with socio – economic lines. Taking into account the devastated state of our economy and the big economic gap that is already clearly observable in our society, it would be unrealistic to think that establishment of public Internet access points in libraries and schools, albeit very helpful, would completely solve problems of Digital Divide. Until the country's infrastructure catches up, we should work closely with central and local authorities, schools and other educational institutions to make our libraries information clearing houses using whatever media is available and most effective at this moment.

Academic libraries are also in a deep crisis. No university or an institute can provide quality education or carry out quality research without decent libraries. Some administrators may think that the Web will provide us with all necessary information and there is no need in traditional libraries. We have to inform and educate our society that this is an irresponsible approach, even economically. While in some disciplines there is a growing tendency to put research papers online for free download, in other areas rapid commercialization of education, creation of distance learning programs severely limits free access to instructional materials. In the Global economy there are no geographic borders for providing education and this leads to increased competition among universities and institutions of high education. Moreover, there is a problem with using copyrighted materials in online publications. All these together inhibit free distribution of instructional or research materials on the Web. Subscriptions and licenses to electronic journals and books are even more

expensive than for printed ones. Even if we can afford to buy them, we do not have infrastructure in place to effectively access/use them. Thus, the need in traditional libraries will not go away in our region. Our policy makers and heads of universities should realize that unless our universities will offer decent libraries and computer facilities to students for studying and doing research these institutions will simply degenerate into diploma printing machines. The AIS plans to work closely with the Tbilisi State University to address the problem and invites every interested party for cooperation.

There are some concerns about school libraries. Many public schools do not have libraries any more. Considering current high prices on school text books and class support materials, shifting a burden of expenditures of textbook acquisition on underpaid teachers and student families makes easy to foresee what a grim future is waiting us ahead. If we will not start addressing this issue, within the next 10 years will receive a generation that will not be able to even read properly.

It is not a simple coincidence that we observe growing religious extremism and mysticism in some parts of our society. We, as librarians, should oppose to these troubling tendencies by clearly stating our position and conducting active education campaigns.

We realize that many of the problems we've talked about are caused by the country's current socio – economic conditions and any possible solution to it can be sought only in connection with complex economic or political reforms in the country. Many of you probably wonder whether librarians can influence the government policymaking at all. It appears we can and key points here as always are education and an initiative - being proactive. That is why the AIS puts so much emphasis on the provision of continuing professional education for our librarians. First, we need to educate ourselves. We need to learn what new information technologies are available, what new library standards are, what are basic rules of new market economy and democratic governance, how professional media works, how we can raise additional funding for our libraries and how we can influence decision and policy making process at local and/or state levels. And, most importantly, we need strong library associations that will organize our library community into an active and effective force ready to promote the library agenda in the country. Many of these subjects we have already been teaching at our regional CPE center, but to listen to the top professionals, who use this knowledge in their everyday work, is different. The ALA has a long experience of conducting successful library advocacy campaigns and fighting various kinds of censorship and they generously agree to serve as our guides in these, still uncharted waters for us.

And together we will make our libraries better and associations stronger.

Thank you.

Besiki Stvilia

President

Association of Information Specialists